

Article

Insights on Canadian Society

Living arrangements of children in Canada: A century of change

by Nora Bohnert, Anne Milan and Heather Lathe



April 2014

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...	not available for any reference period
...	not available for a specific reference period
...	not applicable
0	true zero or a value rounded to zero
0*	value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
p	preliminary
r	revised
x	suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the <i>Statistics Act</i>
e	use with caution
f	too unreliable to be published
*	significantly different from reference category (p < 0.05)

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Overview

Over the last 100 years, Canada has experienced many social, economic, legislative, and cultural changes. As a result, the family circumstances and living arrangements of Canadians have evolved substantially. What can the census of population reveal about the changing diversity of children's living arrangements over time?

- In 1931, 12% of children were in lone-parent families, close to the proportion experienced in 1981 (13%). Most of these children lived with a widowed lone parent, meaning that a relatively large share of children at this time had experienced the death of a parent.
- The baby-boom years (1946 to 1965) were characterized by a relatively large share of married-couple families and high fertility rates. In 1961, 94% of children in census families were living with married parents, the highest proportion observed over the past century.
- In subsequent decades, the share of lone-parent families rose, from a low of 6% in 1961 to 15% in 1991 and to 22% in 2011. In contrast to the lone-parent families of the early 20th century, a larger proportion of these families were headed by women.
- In the early 21st century, nearly 1 million children, or 11% of all children aged 24 and under, lived in couple families in which at least one child was the biological or adopted child of only one spouse or partner. These families are referred to as stepfamilies.

Introduction

Canada, like many industrialized countries, has experienced many social, economic, legislative and cultural changes over the past century. These changes have affected different aspects of everyday life, including family circumstances and living arrangements. Children are no exception to these changes, as the characteristics of the families in which they live are influenced by the societal conditions of a particular era.

In this article, the family structure and living arrangements of Canadian children are examined over consecutive generations, based on census data for the period from 1901 to 2011 (see *Data sources, methods and*

definitions). The census provides both an extensive time series and a unique lens to examine the circumstances of children in Canada over time. Four eras reflecting major shifts in living arrangements are considered: the early 20th century, the baby boom (mid-20th century), the late 20th century, and the early 21st century. The results show that every period has its own distinct characteristics—yet, results also indicate that some issues frequently considered modern phenomena have actually been present over many decades. More information can be found in the full version of this article, *Enduring diversity: Living arrangements of children in Canada over 100 years of the census*.

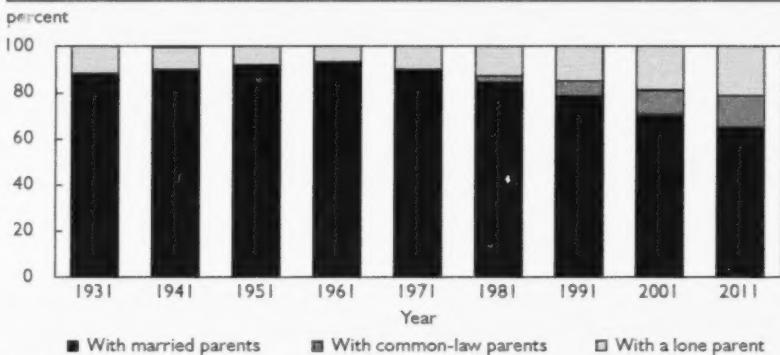
The first half of the 20th century

Over the first half of the 20th century, Canada's social landscape changed dramatically. Increased urbanization and industrialization, medical and sanitary innovations, the Great Depression and two world wars were among the factors that influenced the everyday lives of children in Canadian families. At that time of transition, early censuses showed that many children in Canada had a very different experience of childhood compared with today.

At the turn of the 20th century, census families (a couple, with or without children, or a lone parent with one or more children) were more likely to have individuals who were not immediate family members living in their homes. In 1901, 31%¹ of census-family households contained additional people (non-census family persons and/or other census families) compared with 9% in 2011. Most of these additional household members in 1901 were other relatives, lodgers/boarders or employees of the "family head".² Many of these diverse family living arrangements were the result of the death of one or more family members.

In the early 20th century, death within the family was a much more common experience for young children. In 1921, for instance, 9% of children aged 15 and under had experienced the death of at least one parent³ (in comparison, less than 1% of children aged 0 to 14 lived in a widowed lone-parent family in 2011). Lone parenthood was thus often the result of widowhood, and many children remained with one parent in a lone-parent family in those days (Chart 1). The proportion of children who lived with a lone parent was nearly as high in 1931 (12%) as it was in 1981 (13%).

Chart 1 Distribution of children aged 24 and under in census families, by living arrangements, 1931 to 2011



Note: Data on common-law couple families are not available prior to 1981. Historical comparisons for children in census families, particularly in lone-parent families, must be interpreted with caution due to conceptual changes over time.

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1931 to 2011.

Some children even experienced the death of both parents in childhood, resulting in them living with other relatives or non-relatives. It is estimated that there were approximately 55,000 children aged 14 and under living with a non-parental guardian in 1901.⁴ This was close to double the number of foster children of the same age recorded in 2011 (29,600)⁵ for a population that was three times as large. The majority of these "guardianship children" lived with a member of their immediate or extended family, such as a grandparent, or an aunt, uncle or older sibling.

The baby boom

In the years immediately following the Second World War (1946 to 1965), men and women began marrying at a greater rate and at a younger age than in preceding decades. Women also began having children at a younger age, on average, than previous cohorts.⁶ These changes contributed to the baby boom, which defines this period in the nation's history.

These demographic shifts, together with reductions in child and adult mortality, contributed to a different family experience for many children born during the middle of the 20th century—one that mainly centred on two married parents. Hence, in 1961, 94% of the 7.8 million children in census families were living with married parents, the highest proportion in the data observed over the past century. Correspondingly, the proportion of children living with a lone parent reached a low of 6% in 1961, half the share observed 30 years earlier in 1931 (12%).

Fertility rates were also higher in the baby-boom years. In 1959, the total fertility rate⁷ reached a peak of 3.9 children per woman—the highest ever recorded over a period stretching from 1926 to 2011.⁸ As a result, children accounted for a relatively large share of the total Canadian population during the baby boom compared with the immediately preceding decades. In 1961, people aged 24 and under comprised close to one-half (48%)

of Canada's population, and over one-third (34%) of the population was aged 14 and under.

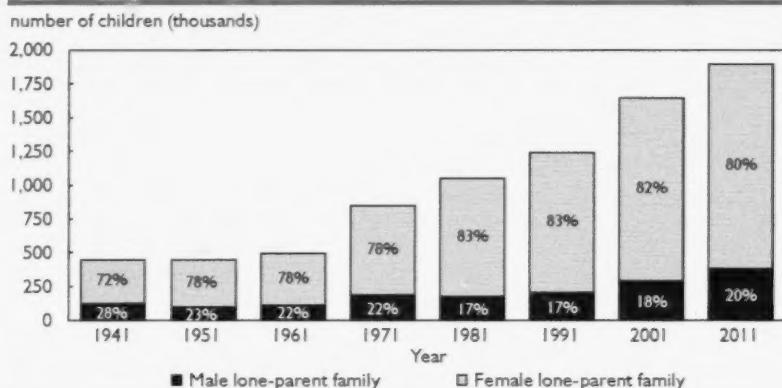
Post-baby boom to late 20th century

By the end of the 1960s, events such as the legalization of the birth control pill, and the growing participation of women in higher education and in the paid labour force contributed to later family formation, smaller family sizes and an increased diversity of family structures compared with the preceding baby-boom period. Legislative changes also contributed to an increase in the number of divorces.⁹ Reflecting some of these societal changes, the share of children living with a lone parent rose from a low of 6% in 1961 to 15% in 1991.

However, the proportion of lone-parent families headed by men declined in these years. In the early decades of the 20th century, relatively high maternal mortality contributed to proportionally more male lone parents being enumerated compared with later in the century. By the end of the 20th century, the relative proportion of children in male lone-parent families had declined to 17% in 1991, compared with 28% in 1941.¹⁰

Information about common-law couples first became available with the 1981 Census. In those years, however, the share of children living with common-law parents was relatively low. In 1981, the proportion of children living with common-law parents was 3%. In 1991, the proportion increased to 6%.

Chart 2 Number of children aged 24 and under living in lone-parent families and the distribution of these children by sex of the parent, 1941 to 2011



Note: Historical comparisons for children in census families, particularly in lone-parent families, must be interpreted with caution due to conceptual changes over time.

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1941 to 2011.

The 21st century to date

The current century has witnessed a continuation of many societal changes that began in the preceding century, which have influenced the living arrangements of children. While the majority of children (65%) continued to live with married parents in 2011, 14% lived with common-law parents (up from 3% in 1981 and 6% in 1991) and 22% lived with a lone parent—the highest percentage recorded since comparable statistics became available (in 1931).

Fertility levels also remained relatively low in the early 2000s. In 2011, the total fertility rate was 1.6 children per woman, less than one-half that observed at the peak of the baby boom.¹¹ In turn, the proportion of large families (with at

least three children) progressively declined, from 42% in 1961 to 19% in 2011 (Chart 3). In contrast, the proportion of families with one child or two children rose over the same period—from 29% to 39% in the case of one child families and from 29% to 43% in the case of families with two children. As a result, individuals aged 24 and under accounted for a relatively smaller proportion of the total population in 2011 (30%) than during the baby boom (48% in 1961).

Another key change during the 21st century has been the increasing recognition of different family structures. While diverse structures such as stepfamilies have always existed to some degree, it was not until 2011 that information on their precise structure became available in the census. Hence, children living

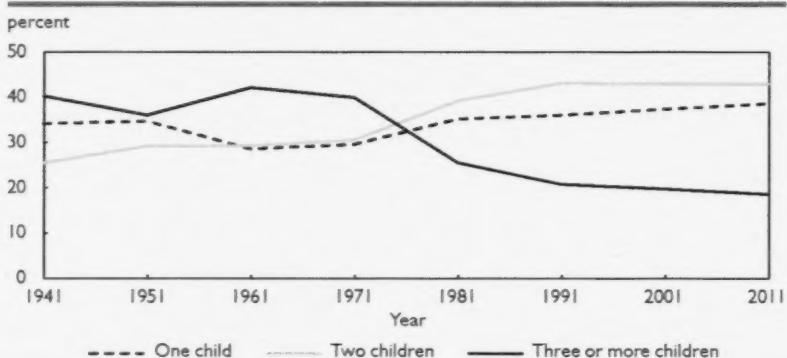
in couple families could either be classified as living in 'intact' families (in which all children are the biological and/or adopted children of both married spouses or common-law partners) or 'stepfamilies' (in which at least one child is the biological or adopted child of only one married spouse or common-law partner).

In 2011, 929,600 children, or 11% of all children, lived in stepfamilies. The proportion of children who lived in stepfamilies in 2011 varied by age (Chart 4), being highest for those aged 10 to 14 and 15 to 19 (12% each) and lowest for those aged 0 to 4 (8%).

As these more detailed and varied concepts of family structure continue to be measured, future censuses will reveal how the relative prevalence of children living in these varied family structures will continue to evolve. Combined with the trends regarding married, common-law and lone-parent families, the new millennium has, to date, been a time of considerable growth in the variation—and measurement—of children's living arrangements.

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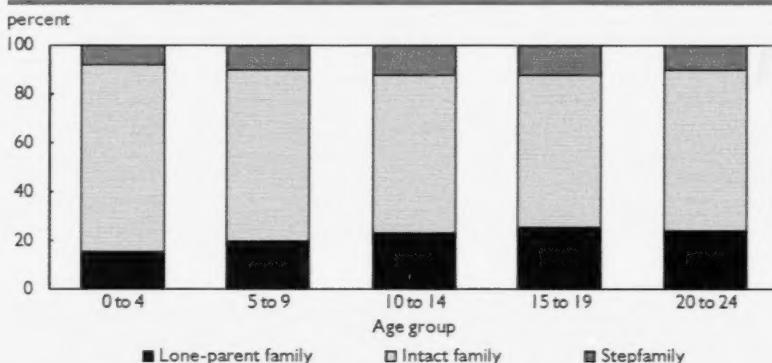
Chart 3 Distribution of families with children aged 24 and under by number of children, 1941 to 2011



Notes: For the years 1941 to 1971, the numerator is "all children aged 24 and under" and the denominator is "families with all children aged 24 and under". For the years 1981 to 2011, the numerator is "children in families with at least one child aged 24 and under" and the denominator is "families with at least one child aged 24 and under". Historical comparisons for census families must be interpreted with caution due to conceptual changes in 2001.

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1941 to 2011.

Chart 4 Distribution of children living in selected family structures by age group, 2011



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011.

Data sources, methods and definitions

The data used in this article are from the Canadian census of population for the period from 1901 to 2011. Due to conceptual changes over time, historical comparisons of census families and children in census families must be interpreted with caution. For more information on the data, concepts and indicators used in this study, readers are invited to consult the Appendix of the full version of this article, *Enduring diversity: Living arrangements of children in Canada over 100 years of the census*. The full version of this document contains more in-depth analysis on the living arrangements and family circumstances of children over the past 100 years, including information about children's mortality, labour force participation and education in the early 20th century.

Notes

1. Calculated from Burke (2007).
2. In the 1971 Census and in previous censuses, in a husband-wife family, the husband if present, was automatically designated the family head. In a lone-parent family, the male or female parent was always the family head. In the 1976 Census, the term "family head" was eliminated. See Wargon (1979).
3. 1921 Census of Canada Vol. III. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-1921. Table 31.
4. See Darroch (2007).
5. See Milan and Bohnert (2012).
6. See Milan (2000).
7. The total fertility rate refers to the number of children that a woman would have over the course of her reproductive life if she experienced the age-specific fertility rates observed in a particular calendar year.
8. Based on data beginning in 1926, using the following data sources: Statistics Canada (n.d.), *Canadian Vital Statistics: Births Database, 1926 to 2011*; and Survey 3231, Demography Division, demographic estimates.
9. In 1968, the *Divorce Act* introduced no-fault divorce based on a separation of at least three years.
10. After reaching a low of 16% in 1996, the proportion of lone-parent families headed by men increased again (to reach 20% in 2011), but remained below the rates of the early 20th century.
11. See Milan (2013).

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